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ABSTRACT

A study examined: (1) the extent to which teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) possess beliefs about second language learning and teaching consistent with the major theoretical explanations in the field of ESL; (2) the extent to which these beliefs are associated with classroom instructional practices; and (3) perceptions of ESL teachers about the contextual variables in ESL classrooms that influence those practices. Data collected included information from the following sources: semi-structured interviews with 30 ESL teachers; descriptive data on the teachers' background and characteristics; classroom observation and instructional analysis with three of the teachers having different dominant theoretical orientations; and modified stimulus recall procedures to examine contextual variables. Results suggest that most teachers have theoretical orientations consistent with the major theories in the field. However, 40% had other orientations. The three teachers identified as having differing theoretical orientations were found to use instructional practices associated with the underlying assumptions of theoretical beliefs. Contextual factors identified as influencing instructional decisions were primarily the academic and real-life language needs of their students, supporting the notion of the strong influence of extra-instructional, societal factors. Implications for classroom instruction and teacher preparation are discussed. (MSE)

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The Theoretical Orientations of English as a Second Language Teachers: The Relationship Between Beliefs and Practices

In order to understand how teachers' thinking influences their instructional behavior, the research on teacher cognition has sought to describe the psychological context within which teachers teach (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Among other variables, teachers theories and beliefs about learning and teaching are believed to make up an important part of the prior knowledge through which teachers perceive, process, and act upon information in the classroom (Munby, 1982). In the fields of reading and writing, it has been proposed that teachers organize their instruction according to a conceptual framework or theoretical orientation which influences the nature of their classroom instruction (Harste & Burke, 1977, Duffy & Anderson, 1982; Deford, 1985; Leu & Kinzer, 1987; Mango & Allen, 1986).

This study examined English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' implicit theories and beliefs about second language learning and teaching in order to determine the extent to which these beliefs influence classroom instruction. The study had three main purposes. The first was to determine the extent to which ESL teachers possess theoretical beliefs about second language learning and teaching which are consistent with the major theoretical explanations in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). The second was to determine the extent to which ESL teachers' theoretical beliefs about second language learning and teaching are associated with their instructional practices in the classroom. The third explored ESL teachers' perceptions of the contextual variables within ESL classrooms which they perceived as influencing their instructional practices.

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Procedures

To investigate each of the research questions in this study, three phases of data collection and analysis were conducted. Phase 1 consisted of semi-structured interviews with 30 ESL teachers in which multiple sources of data were gathered to identify dominant theoretical beliefs about second language learning and teaching. The interview consisted of an Ideal Instructional Protocol, a Lesson Plan Analysis Task, and a Beliefs Inventory. In addition, descriptive data were collected on the background characteristics of these ESL teachers in order to determine if certain background characteristics might be associated with certain types of theoretical orientations. The data from Phase 1 were used to identify ESL teachers who have dominant theoretical orientations which were consistent with one of the three major theoretical explanations in the TESOL field.

Phase 2 consisted of the observation and analysis of the classroom instruction of three ESL teachers with different dominant theoretical orientations. Each teacher was observed teaching eight different instructional lessons. Each lesson was audio-taped and later transcribed. Each lesson was parsed into Instructional Units by independent raters following procedures established by Martin-Rehrmann and Leu (1987) and later coded as Drill-Based, Grammar-Based, or Meaning-Based using established operational definitions. Three single factor ANOVA were used to determine if significant associations were found between teachers' theoretical orientations and the nature of their classroom practices.

Phase 3 involved using a modification of stimulus recall procedures established by Shavelson & Stern (1981) to examine the types of contextual variables which ESL teachers perceive as influencing their instructional practices. These data were used to create a descriptive frequency of the types of contextual variables which ESL teachers perceive as influencing their instructional decisions.

Discussion - Phase # 1 Dominant Theoretical Orientations

The Multidimensional TESOL Theoretical Orientation Profile used as a measure of ESL teachers' dominant theoretical orientations in this study represents an initial attempt to characterize ESL teachers' theoretical beliefs about second language learning and teaching. The results of the profile suggests that the majority of the ESL teachers in this study possess dominant theoretical orientations which are consistent with the major theoretical explanations in the field of TESOL. While based solely on descriptive data, the theoretical explanations which have historically shaped the TESOL field may have also shaped the way in which ESL teachers think about second language learning and teaching. One speculative finding of this study suggests that dominant theoretical orientations may be associated to some extent with the number of years ESL teachers have taught ESL and the type of educational training they received. The temporal nature of the association between certain types of background characteristics and different theoretical orientations may represent one source of ESL teachers' theoretical beliefs about second language learning and teaching.

On the other hand, a substantial portion of the teachers in this study (40%) were identified as having other types of theoretical orientations. One might speculate that some ESL teachers have consciously embodied certain aspects of two or three theoretical explanations and incorporated them into their own eclectic theoretical orientation. However, one might also speculate that the theoretical persuasion of some ESL teachers may not reflect the major theoretical explanations in the field. That is, the nature of some teachers' theoretical beliefs may not reflect the Behaviorist/drill-based, Cognitivist/grammar-based, or Communicative/ meaning-based theoretical explanations and therefore were not identified by the Multidimensional TESOL Theoretical Orientation Profile. Then again, it may also be the case that some ESL teachers have no clear theoretical beliefs about second language learning or teaching.

Since the Multidimensional TESOL Theoretical Orientation Profile was designed to identify only ESL teachers with dominant theoretical orientations further research that includes data collection measures which are sensitive to other types of ESL teachers' theoretical beliefs is needed in order to determine the true nature of ESL teachers theoretical orientations.

This study has only begun to identify some of the possible sources of ESL teachers' theoretical beliefs. In order to fully understand the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices empirical research is needed which fully explores the sources, presence and strength of ESL teachers' theoretical orientations. Furthermore, further research is necessary which considers other aspects of ESL teachers' belief systems in order to fully understand the relationship between ESL teachers theoretical beliefs and their instructional practices.

Discussion - Phase #2 The Relationship between Beliefs and Practices

The results of this study also found that the three ESL teachers identified as having different dominant theoretical orientations used instructional practices which were associated with the underlying assumptions of their theoretical beliefs. Likewise, the instructional practices used by each teacher were found to be significantly different from that of the other two teachers. The most striking differences between their instructional practices can be linked to the fundamental differences between their theoretical orientations. Namely, Donna's emphasis on the drill and practice of langauge patterns, versus Greg's conscious use of the grammatical structures of the language, versus Martha's focus on the meaning of ideas and concepts within the language. Each teacher was found to present vocabulary differently, emphasize different aspects of grammar instruction, and provide different types of reading and writing activities for their ESL students. They also highlighted different aspects of their instructional materials, emphasized different second language learning skills, followed different instructional procedures, and created different types of environments for second language learning to occur. Such findings suggest that a strong association exists between these ESL teachers' theoretical orientations and the nature of their instructional practices. Overall, it appears that these ESL teachers made instructional decisions and used instructional practices in accordance with the underlying assumptions of their theoretical orientation toward second language learning and teaching.

Discussion - Phase #3 Contextual Variables which Influence Instructional Decisions

The findings of this study also described three ESL teachers' perceptions of the contextual factors which influenced their instructional practices. Many of these factors appear to be associated with the unique characteristics of their secondary-level ESL programs. In all three ESL programs, the goal for the students was to increase their English language proficiency, become fully integrated into the content-area classes, and eventually graduate from high school. Due to the nature of these ESL classrooms each teacher became responsible for not only English language instruction, but also for providing the background knowledge and language-related skills which they believed their ESL students would need to succeed in the mainstream academic program. Since ESL students were allowed to enter these programs at different times during the year and with varying levels of English language proficiency, moving ESL students out of the ESL program and into mainstream classes as quickly and as efficiently as possible became an enormous task for these ESL teachers. Given these unique instructional circumstances, it is not surprising that the ESL teachers in this study overwhelmingly cited the Academic/Real-Life Needs needs of their students as influencing their instructional decisions.

The contextual factors identified in this study suggest that instructional decisions are influenced by broader based academic and social concerns which may be inherent to secondary-level ESL programs. This finding supports the claim by Ogbu (1981) that the context of most classrooms tend to be influenced more by larger societal forces imposed upon the schooling institutional itself, than by the interactions which take place between teachers and students within the classroom. Due to the unique social, emotional, cultural, as well as language-related needs of their students, the ESL teachers in this study seemed especially concerned about helping their students adjust to and succeed in and beyond the American high school. Instructional materials needs also appeared to influence these teachers' instructional practices. In their recall comments, each teacher recognized that no one set of instructional materials would sufficiently meet the needs of all ESL students and therefore, developed strategies for modifying and adapting their instructional materials to meet the unique needs of their ESL students.

Implications

The strength of the association between ESL teachers' beliefs and practices found in this study has direct pedagogical implications for the field of TESOL. By coming to understand the relationship between beliefs and practices, pre-service and in-service ESL teachers can become aware of how their theoretical beliefs influence their actions during classroom instruction. The raising of teachers' consciousness about the cognitive dimensions of teaching encourages what Donald Schon (1983) describes as "reflective practice", or the use of conscious reflection about what teachers do as a means of enabling them to become aware of how their tacit knowledge shapes the way they understand and act upon information in the classroom. Schon (1987) also proposes that educating "reflective practitioners" requires creating opportunities for teachers to use conscious reflection as a means of understanding the relationship between their own thoughts and actions during instruction.

In ESL instructional contexts, a conscious awareness of how theoretical beliefs influence instructional practices may enable ESL teachers to become aware of how they think and act during classroom instruction. A move toward recognizing the cognitive dimensions of teaching in professional TESOL preparation programs can begin by creating opportunities for ESL teachers to understand what their theoretical beliefs are and how these beliefs influence the way they think and act during classroom instruction.

Knowledge about the contextual factors within the classroom which ESL teachers' perceive as influencing their instructional practices has direct pedagogical implications for the field of TESOL. Professional TESOL preparation programs need to make explicit the contextual factors which influence instructional practices so that pre-service and in-service ESL teachers can begin to develop strategies for dealing with specific aspects of classroom life which influence the way they think and act as they teach. In order for ESL teachers to meet the unique needs of their ESL students, professional TESOL preparation programs should begin to recognize the tenuous role which ESL programs often play within the structure of larger educational systems. Such programs should begin to prepare ESL teachers to make instructional decisions which are sensitive to the specific academic, real-life, cultural, and social needs of their ESL students. Pre-service as well as in-service ESL teachers need to develop strategies for adapting and supplementing their instructional materials to meet the unique academic and social needs of their ESL students.

Limitations

It should be noted that the implications of this study are limited by the fact that the instructional practices of only three ESL teachers were observed and carefully analyzed. Therefore, no firm generalizations can be made to other ESL teachers teaching in different instructional contexts. Further research on a larger sample of ESL teachers in a variety of instructional contexts is needed to substantiate the findings of this study. In addition, the contextual factors identified in this study may be unique to secondary-level ESL instructional contexts. Further research is needed on a broader sample of ESL teachers in elementary, college and adult level ESL programs in order to determine if similar contextual factors influence ESL teachers' decisions in different instructional contexts.

Conclusion

This study has only begun to provide new insights into the relationship between teachers' theoretical beliefs and their instructional practices in ESL instructional contexts. Overall, this study has begun to define one aspect of the psychological context within which ESL teachers teach by recognizing dominant theoretical orientations as an important aspect of teacher thinking which appears to be associated with instructional practices in the classroom. Research which increases our understanding of the contextual factors within ESL classrooms that teachers perceive as influencing their instructional decisions is essential. Such research will not only establish insights into how ESL teachers perceive, process, and act upon information during classroom instruction, but will also enable professional TESOL preparation programs to prepare ESL teachers to become more effective English language teachers. Further research is now needed to test the findings which were generated in this study in order to establish a grounded theoretical framework of English language teaching upon which the field of language teacher education can built.

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